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ABSTRACT

Significant changes that have occurred in the evaluation of overall faculty performance and classroom teaching performance between 1983 and 1988 are discussed from the viewpoint of a 1988 study that surveyed all accredited, four-year undergraduate, liberal arts colleges listed in the "Higher Education Directory". For years, faculty evaluation has carried the cachet of serving a useful purpose, but never before has it carried the make-or-break intensity it does on the campus today. How an institution appraises a professor's performance has assumed new importance since a professional life may depend on it. Significant study findings include the following: classroom teaching is the most important consideration in the evaluation of overall faculty performance; systematic student ratings are the second most important information source in appraising classroom teaching performance, faculty committees are crucial in evaluating teaching; self-evaluation has picked up considerable support; and classroom visits have gained significantly in importance. Since 1983, only limited change has taken place in the evaluation of overall performance, but considerable change has occurred in the evaluation of classroom teaching. A direct outgrowth of improved evaluation practices will be improvement in teaching performance. Tables are included. (SM)

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How Colleges Evaluate Professors

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1988 vs. 1983

by Peter Seldin

As the number of college professors awarded promotion and tenure diminishes, many professors ponder with a sense of apprehension the evaluation criteria applied to them. Simultaneously, many academic deans and department chairs ponder the validity of their promotion/tenure decisions.

For years, faculty evaluation has carried the cachet of serving a useful purpose, but never before has it carried the make-or-break intensity it does on campus today.

Why? One reason is faculty mobility is virtually a thing of the past. How an institution appraises a professor's performance has assumed new importance since a professional life may depend on it. For their part, colleges are under the gun of community and governmental groups to hold professors accountable for their performance.

To examine current evaluation policies and procedures, early in 1988 I surveyed all the accredited, four-year, undergraduate, liberal arts colleges listed in the *Higher Education Directory.* To make the population more manageable, I excluded university-related liberal arts colleges. Of the 745 academic deans to whom I sent questionnaires, 604 (81 percent) responded. The high rate of return probably reflects the troubled concerns over the business of faculty ratings.

Another purpose of the survey was to uncover changes in institutional policies and procedures since my last survey in 1983. For comparison's sake, the base data for both surveys were identical.

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The questionnaire I used was first developed by the American Council on Education (ACE) in 1967 and was revised by the Educational Testing Service in 1977. It was designed to gather data on the policies and procedures that guide institutions as they evaluate faculty performance for decisions on retention, promotion in rank, and tenure.

I expect that complete findings of the 1988 study will be reported in other educational publications. In this article I want to focus on the significant changes that have occurred in the evaluation of *overall* faculty performance and *classroom teaching* performance in the last five years.

Evaluating performance

When an institution considers a professor for retention, promotion, or tenure it weighs many factors. Thirteen factors were included in the questionnaire. The deans were asked to rate each factor as being a "major factor," a "minor factor," "not a factor," or "not applicable." Table 1 summarizes the results.

Even a cursory examination of the data reveals that things have not changed very much in five years. In fact, of the thirteen criteria, only the importance of research changed by as much as 5 percent.

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Attention paid to the other traditional benchmarks of academic achievement—publication and activity in professional societies—continues unabated. That published research and professional society activities continue to be important seems a reflection of the vigorous efforts by deans to capture the public eye for their faculty's scholarship.

In the words of one California dean: "High visibility is the name of the game today. The state controls the budget, so we push the faculty to publish, publish, publish." A Texas dean said bluntly: "If the faculty doesn't publish, the college will perish."

Colleges seem to be pressing faculty to get involved in research, to publish journal articles, and to present papers at professional meetings. But at the same time, they are not overlooking their faculty's on-campus activities. Campus committee work and student advising each remain a "major factor."

This suggests that colleges are paying attention to students as customers—understandable given the economic stress under which many colleges find themselves. Colleges are extending themselves to keep their students happy and in school.

For years, the factor "personal attributes" has functioned as a convenient mechanism to ease

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out of their jobs faculty members who are out of step with the dean, the department chair, or colleagues. Unfortunately, it remains a often-cited "major factor." This suggests that some faculty members will continue to be punished for having the wrong friends, the wrong politics, or the wrong personality.

Length of service in rank still earns substantial importance in a professor's overall evaluation. Deans relying on this factor would likely argue that the longer one serves in a particular academic rank, the greater the value of one's contribution to the literature. That concept, however, may be challenged by younger professors, who see themselves more in tune with institutional and student needs.

As a Florida college dean wrote: "The young faculty are still hungry. They are the first to volunteer for college assignments. They put in long hours advising students. And they're the ones we turn to first for help."

To assess change since 1983 in the importance of the factors considered in *overall* assessment,

Table 1. Percentage of liberal arts colleges that consider each factor a "major factor" in evaluating *overall* faculty performance.

Factor	1983 (N=616)	1988 (N=604)
Classroom teaching	98.7	99.8
Supervision of graduate study	3.7	2.8
Supervision of honors program	1.9	2.4
Research	33.4	38.8
Publication	29.2	29.4
Public service	17.4	19.5
Consultation (government, business)	2.4	2.4
Activity in professional societies	24.5	24.9
Student advising	61.7	64.4
Campus committee work	52.6	54.1
Length of service in rank	46.8	43.9
Competing job offers	1.8	1.8
Personal attributes	28.6	29.4

Table 2. Percentage of liberal arts colleges that "always used" each source of information in evaluating faculty *teaching* performance.

Source of information	1983 (N=616)	1988 (N=604)
Systematic student ratings	67.5	80.3
Informal student opinions	11.5	11.3
Classroom visits	19.8	27.4
Colleagues' opinions	43.3	44.3
Scholarly research/publication	27.3	29.0
Student examination performance	3.6	3.6
Chair evaluation	81.3	80.9
Dean evaluation	75.0	72.6
Course syllabi and exams	20.1	29.0
Long-term follow-up of students	3.4	3.2
Enrollment in elective courses	1.1	1.2
Alumni opinions	3.9	3.2
Committee evaluation	46.1	49.3
Grade distribution	4.5	4.2
Self-evaluation or report	41.9	49.3

I performed t-tests of differences in mean scores. Each question had called for one of four responses, and I assigned each response a numerical weight: "major factor"-1, "minor factor"-2, "not a factor"-3, and "not applicable"-3.

To determine the mean score for a factor, I added its weights and divided the sum by the number of deans responding. This ranking process, used by ACE in an earlier study, simplifies the process of identifying important factors.

In fact, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean score in 1983 and in 1988 for any of the thirteen factors, although several trends are evident. (These trends are especially clear when data from my 1978 survey are considered as well.)

Yet, it does deserve noting that, in most cases, the mean scores are lower in 1988; that is, deans are giving greater importance to more factors in evaluating *overall* faculty performance.

Despite the financial duress under which so many institutions operate, only limited change has taken place since 1983 in the evaluation of *overall* performance. But, considerable change has occurred in the evaluation of *classroom teaching* performance.

Evaluating teaching performance

Most colleges perceive with pride the high caliber of teaching offered by their faculty. The perception is demonstrated anew by this study, in which classroom teaching is cited almost unanimously as a "major factor" in evaluating a faculty member's *overall* performance.

It is reasonable to assume, then, that deans take considerable pains to locate relevant sources of information on teaching competence. How do they assess such competence? What information sources do they use?

To find out, the questionnaire asked the deans to "Indicate the frequency with which each of the following types of information is used in your college in evaluating a faculty member's teaching performance." The respondents had four possible responses, and, again, I assigned each a numerical weight: "always used"-1, "usually used"-2, "seldom used"-3, and "never used"-4. Table 2 displays the information sources and the percentage of deans who "always used" each source.

The evidence points to significant changes in the ways liberal arts colleges assess information sources when evaluating teaching performance. Of the fifteen sources, four changed by 7 percent or more since 1983, and, more significantly, they all changed in the same direction. Each of these four sources of information is more widely used now.

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The number of deans reporting they always rely on systematic student ratings has dramatically increased in the five years. Today, perhaps for the first time, student ratings are more widely used to assess teaching than any other source of information except the department chair.

The rapid growth in importance of student ratings has exacerbated the conflict over their value. A Nebraska dean argues: "Student ratings should never be used. They can't be trusted." Opposed is a Massachusetts dean: "Student ratings are the most trustworthy factor in evaluating teaching."

What other information sources do institutions rely on? The other front-runners are still evaluations by the department chair and the academic dean. Of the two, the chair's is still predominant, and the gap is widening.

Scholarly research/publication as an indicator of *teaching* performance has grown. The growth dovetails with the emphasis on research and publication cited

Table 3. T-tests of differences in mean scores of sources of information used in evaluating faculty *teaching* performance.

Source of information	1983 (N=616)	1988 (N=604)	t
Systematic student ratings	1.44	1.25	4.69*
Informal student opinions	2.41	2.45	-0.98
Classroom visits	2.43	2.18	4.54*
Colleagues' opinions	1.71	1.74	-0.77
Scholarly research/publication	2.23	2.23	-0.01
Student examination performance	3.03	3.06	-0.67
Chair evaluation	1.26	1.27	-0.25
Dean evaluation	1.36	1.42	-1.32
Course syllabi and exams	2.22	2.01	4.10*
Long-term follow-up of students	3.15	3.06	1.71
Enrollment in elective courses	3.12	3.21	-1.91
Alumni opinions	3.08	3.05	0.70
Committee evaluation	2.06	2.05	0.12
Grade distribution	3.07	3.03	0.85
Self-evaluation or report	1.96	1.78	2.90*

The test was a t-test for differences in independent proportions.

*Significant at .01 level of confidence.

earlier in the evaluation of *overall* performance.

Educators have argued for years whether research and publication enhances the professor's classroom performance. The argument has produced considerable heat but, unfortunately, very little light. Some educators insist they cannot stimulate and be up-to-date in the classroom unless they are engaged in research. Others insist with equal fervor that college research only indirectly, if at all, relates to classroom teaching.

Perhaps the argument needs to be laid to rest. If research and publication provides genuine insight into the professor's teaching effectiveness, it can be used to assess classroom competence. Otherwise, it cannot.

Table 3 displays the t-tests of differences in mean scores. Analysis indicates statistically significant differences at the .01 level of confidence in mean scores for four information sources: classroom visits, course syllabi and exams, self-evaluation or report, and systematic student ratings.

Classroom visits have won popularity as an assessment tool. The number of institutions incorporating classroom visits as an important component in the evaluation process has multiplied. Yet, classroom visits remain a controversial subject. To an Illinois dean: "Classroom visits are the only way really to know what's going on behind closed doors." To a Texas dean: "Classroom visits demean the teacher and have no value."

Judgments on teaching performance are increasingly based on analysis of course syllabi and exams. Central to this approach is scrutiny of such instructional items as course content, objectives, methodology, examinations and grading, course organization, and homework assignments. The growing use of handouts, reading lists, homework assignments, and student examinations and reports is consistent with today's trend toward more structured information gathering.

Self-evaluation has also achieved wide eminence as an appraisal technique. A host of colleges are convinced that self-evaluation can and should play a stellar role in a multi-source evaluation process. It can serve as a catalyst to increase self-awareness. This, in turn, can sensitize the professor to the interests of others, to catch unspoken clues to the behavior and needs of others.

At the same time, the growing eminence of self-evaluation has heated up the debate over its value. Deans line up on both sides of the question. In the words of a proponent Oregon dean: "We think self-evaluation deserves great weight, the greatest weight, in the evaluation system." An opponent dean from Georgia: "Self-evaluation is patently so self-serving, it's practically worthless."

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Several significant findings

Clearly, a major stimulus to create a new and workable formula to rate a professor's performance is the admitted dissatisfaction with the way deans currently evaluate faculty. In open-minded comments, many deans confessed frustration in their inability to get past half-success with their evaluation formulas. Finding a satisfactory formula was elusive.

As a Florida dean commented: "This is my fourth year as academic dean. Would you believe it, I still can't put together a good evaluation program." From an Ohio dean: "We recognize that evaluations on this campus are too subjective, and we're working on it. It's not easy." From a North Carolina dean: "We're making progress. It's slow going. You lick one problem and another surfaces."

Faculty evaluation may yet have a long way to go to perfect itself to the satisfaction of deans and professors, but it has undeniably traveled far. In today's accountability climate, it is unlikely to turn back.

A summing up of the more significant findings in the evaluation of *overall* faculty performance and *classroom teaching* performance in the 1988 study includes the following:

- Classroom teaching continues as the most important consideration in evaluating *overall* faculty performance.
- Research, publication, and activity in professional societies are even more prominent today than previously. (In 1978, only 24.5 percent of deans rated research of "major" importance, only 19.0 percent rated publication, and only 17 percent activity in professional societies.)
- The department chair is still the predominant information source in evaluating teaching performance.
- Systematic student ratings have climbed to second place as an information source in appraising classroom teaching performance. (Student ratings were in third place in 1978, at 54.8 percent.)
- Evaluation by the academic dean is not far behind student ratings, but it is losing ground. (In contrast, 76.9 percent of respondents in 1978 said dean evaluation was "always used," putting it in second place.)
- Faculty committees, and to a slightly lesser degree colleagues' opinions, still play a starring role in evaluating teaching.
- Self-evaluation has picked up considerable support. (It was "always used" by only 36.6 percent of institutions in 1978.)
- Classroom visits, along with course syllabi and exams, have gained significantly in importance. (In fact, in 1978 only 14.3 percent of institutions "always used" the former, and only 13.9 percent the latter.)
- Reliance on the professor's scholarly research/publication

as an index of *teaching* performance is more widespread now. (The source rated only 19.9 percent in 1978.)

• Overall, things increased in importance more often than they decreased. From this I conclude that colleges now emphasize a wider range of factors in the search for more accurate and in-depth evaluations of faculty performance.

It is clear that evaluation methods are changing—especially when current practices are compared with those in place in 1978. But, what is left unresolved as yet is which of the changes represent improvement and which are experimental question marks. More certain is a growing conviction among many close observers of higher education that a direct outgrowth of improved evaluation practices will be improvement in teaching performance. ■